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President: Mr. Opertti ..... (Uruguay)

The meeting was called to order at 10.50 a.m.

Agenda item 39 *(continued)*

Question of Palestine

Report of the Committee on the Exercise of the Inalienable Rights of the Palestinian People (A/53/35)

Report of the Secretary-General (A/53/652)

Draft resolutions (A/53/L.48, A/53/L.49, A/53/L.50, A/53/L.51)

Mr. Pham Quang Vinh (Viet Nam): It is my honour to address the Assembly on agenda item 39, entitled "Question of Palestine".

The United Nations is today commemorating the International Day of Solidarity with the Palestinian People, a day that reminds us of the plight of a people that has been suffering for so long.

It is half a century since the Palestinian people was dispossessed of its homes and lands, which calls for strengthened solidarity with, and support for, the Palestinian people.

The question of Palestine is at the core of the situation in the Middle East. While the Middle East peace process is ongoing, it has proved to be a long and arduous one.

My delegation appreciates the report of the Secretary-General on the question of Palestine and on the situation in the Middle East contained in document A/53/652.

We welcome the progress achieved since the signing of the Declaration of Principles on Interim Self-Government Arrangements and, in particular, the recent signing of the Wye River Memorandum between Palestine and Israel as a promising development. We hope that this Memorandum will complement the agreements reached between the parties and enable them to move further forward in their negotiations, including on the issue of permanent status.

We note with concern, however, that difficulties still continue. It is therefore imperative that the agreements already reached between the parties concerned be implemented in good faith and the commitments made be upheld. As the peace process goes on, this will build confidence and create an environment conducive to further progress.

The General Assembly and the Security Council have considered the situation in the occupied Arab territories on a number of occasions during the course of this year and last year, as a matter of urgency. The issue of settlements has been considered to be an obstacle to the peace process that must be overcome.

The Security Council met on this subject in June this year and later issued a presidential statement on 13 July 1998 (S/PRST/1998/21).

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The General Assembly convened its tenth emergency special session last year and adopted resolutions ES-10/2, ES-10/3, ES-10/4 and ES-10/5, in calling for, *inter alia*, the convening of a Conference of the High Contracting Parties to the Geneva Convention on measures to enforce the Convention in the Occupied Palestinian Territory.

From this rostrum, my delegation reaffirms further its strong and consistent support for, and solidarity with, the Palestinian people in their just cause. The question of Palestine requires a comprehensive, just and lasting solution. This solution must ensure the restoration of the inalienable rights of the Palestinian people, including the right to return and to statehood.

We hope that the recent progress will give impetus to the peace process and that the agreements reached will be fully implemented. The parties concerned should overcome the existing obstacles to achieve a just and durable peace in the Middle East on the basis of ensuring the inalienable rights of the Palestinian people, as well as the legitimate interests of the parties concerned.

At this juncture, the United Nations will continue to play an important role, especially in the mobilization of international support for and assistance to the Palestinian people.

In this regard, we commend in particular the contributions made by the Committee on the Exercise of the Inalienable Rights of the Palestinian People. We also highlight the role of the Department of Public Information and the Division for Palestinian Rights, which should be further strengthened.

My delegation welcomes the adoption by the General Assembly of resolution 52/250 on the participation of Palestine in the work of the United Nations. We earnestly look forward to the day when Palestine will enjoy full membership in this Organization.

Mr. Mesdoua (Algeria) (*interpretation from Arabic*): Yesterday we attended the large-scale meeting in commemoration of the International Day of Solidarity with the Palestinian People, which was also attended by the representative of the Secretary-General, the President of the General Assembly, the President of the Security Council and many other delegations representing the Governments and peoples of the world. Such a gathering expressed the unanimous recognition of the international community of its responsibilities towards the question of the Palestinian people, whose long ordeal began with the imposition of the British Mandate on its sovereignty and its destiny in the Middle East region.

It was not enough for the colonial Power to launch such transgression against the rights of the Palestinian people: it made that transgression worse when it issued the infamous Balfour Declaration in 1917.

The crisis was further compounded, reaching its peak when the General Assembly recognized and endorsed the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948 on the usurped territory of Palestine under international circumstances of inequality. That year, 1948, was also the year when the Universal Declaration of Human Rights was promulgated. Since that time the tragedy of the Palestinian people has been exacerbated and disasters have been inflicted on the Palestinian people one after another, ranging from a wave of annihilation, mass murder, deportation and expulsion of citizens from their land and from their homes, making them a diaspora of displaced refugees living in camps without shelter.

The launching of the peace process at the Madrid Conference in 1991 was the source of new hope and optimism with regard to reaching a lasting, just and comprehensive settlement of the Israeli-Arab conflict as a whole. The case of that conflict is the question of the Palestinian people, which is based on international legitimacy, particularly Security Council resolutions 242 (1967), 338 (1973) and 425 (1978), and is basically focused on the principle of land for peace.

The majority of Arab countries participated in the Conference in good faith: both the parties concerned and other Arab countries that stand united with them, including Algeria. This was because we believe it necessary to give the peace effort a historic chance to achieve a final resolution of the problem and to avert war in the region. But this hope did not last long. For after the peace process had made some progress, particularly on the Palestinian track, after the signing of the Oslo and Washington accords in 1993, a climate of confrontation soon prevailed in the region again when the Israeli extremist right took power, ignoring all the achievements that had been made previously, and stating its desire not to pursue the peace process. It even set aside the principle of land for peace, which had been the very foundation of the peace process.

The situation continued to deteriorate when the Israeli Administration decided to resume its settlerist policy in the occupied Palestinian territories and to go to

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extremes in encouraging Jewish settlers to commit acts of provocation against Palestinian citizens and to confiscate their land.

A few weeks ago, the world felt new hope that the peace process would again be revived, when Israel, under pressure from the international community, returned to the negotiating table and, along with the Palestinian Authority, signed the Wye River Memorandum, which, in fact, is nothing but an implementation measure to carry out a previous agreement on the withdrawal of the Israeli army of occupation from certain occupied Palestinian territories. The implementation of that agreement had been suspended for more than 18 months because of the intransigence of the Israeli Administration.

But those hopes were again shattered, because Israel is still working hard to strip the peace process of any substance and thus to convert it into a protracted scheme of manipulation, procrastination, and prevarication, using the flimsiest of pretexts to avoid fulfilling the obligations it undertook *vis-à-vis* the Palestinian side. More than that, Israel has deliberately and publicly turned its back on the spirit of the most recent agreement. The best example of this is its explicit avowal that it will continue to pursue its settlements policy, ignoring all other considerations, by establishing new Jewish settlements in the Palestinian territories and by expanding existing settlements. This runs counter to the letter and the spirit of the principles of international legitimacy and of all the agreements that have been signed with the Palestinian side.

Like every other session, the fifty-third session will come to an end with the Assembly having adopted a number of important resolutions affirming the legitimate and inalienable rights of the Palestinian people. As they do every year, these resolutions — like all other resolutions, including those of the Security Council — will remain dead letters. The evolving situation in occupied Palestine would not have reached this stage of deterioration had the international community demonstrated determination and will to put an end to Israel's stubborn pursuance of the policy of defying the resolutions of international legitimacy on the Middle East in general, and on Palestine in particular.

The United Nations responsibility towards the Palestinian people will remain intact so long as the question of Palestine is without a just and final solution guaranteeing the Palestinians all the rights that are recognized for all other peoples including the right to establish its own independent State, with holy Jerusalem as its capital.

In this connection, Algeria welcomed the resolution adopted at the fifty-second session enhancing the representation of Palestine in the General Assembly and enabling Palestine to participate more fully in the work of the United Nations. In our view, that was a very important first step, which must be followed by further steps towards full membership of the State of Palestine in this international forum.

The resolution of the question of Palestine is an integral part of a comprehensive resolution of the entire question of the Middle East. Every attempt to achieve a just peace in the region must include the imperative of ending Israeli occupation and of bringing about Israeli withdrawal from all occupied Arab territories, including the Syrian Golan and southern Lebanon, in conformity with resolutions of international legitimacy, in particular Security Council resolutions 425 (1978) and 497 (1981). As far as Algeria is concerned, this is the only serious option for the Israeli Administration. It would ensure the return of the Arab territories to their legitimate owners, would avert war in the region, and would create an atmosphere of confidence leading to the establishment of a just, lasting and comprehensive peace that would enable all the peoples of the region to live in security.

Mr. De Saram (Sri Lanka): The subject of Palestine has been on the agenda of the United Nations in one form or another for the past 50 years. For the realization by the Palestinian people of their inalienable national rights, I have the honour today to reaffirm Sri Lanka's wholehearted support.

Those in a position to do so endeavour tirelessly to move all concerned towards the ultimate goal of a just, comprehensive and lasting peace, this most recently in October at the very impressive Wye River meeting, under the auspices of and with the essential and determined participation of the United States.

Meanwhile, it has been one of the principal and continuing responsibilities of the United Nations to keep the political, economic and social circumstances of the Palestinians of the occupied territories in the public eye. This is a responsibility that the General Assembly in particular has discharged conscientiously and discharged well, principally through the Assembly's Committee on the Exercise of the Inalienable Rights of the Palestinian People, whose report is before the General Assembly today. To the Chairman of the Committee, the Permanent Representative of Senegal, Ambassador Ibra Ka, and to the Committee as a whole, I convey great appreciation

for the work the Committee has done and for the report the Committee has presented to the General Assembly.

The Committee tells in its report of the conditions in which the Palestinians of the occupied territories live. The report of the Committee speaks at length and with emphasis of the magnitude of some of the problems the Palestinians of the occupied territories experience each day, problems which in fundamental ways are disruptive of Palestinian life and of Palestinian lands. These include the very major problem of settlements established in the occupied territories contrary to international legal requirements. And there are other difficulties as well, affecting, it would seem, nearly all important aspects of Palestinian life, to which the report of the Committee calls the Assembly's attention with serious and urgent concern.

There is the violence — violence that is deplorable, whatever the circumstances and by whomever caused — when the overall objective must be and has to be reconciliation in peace.

Then, against this almost overwhelmingly grey, depressing and even threatening background came the Wye River Memorandum of October, with its vision and skill, its determination, its courage and its statesmanship. It is most welcome at the present time and most extraordinary in its significance for what can be if there is cooperation where there is now antagonism, friendship where there is now hostility.

Yet we have still the admonition of the Committee on the Exercise of the Inalienable Rights of the Palestinian People, made in the final chapter of its report in the course of its conclusions and recommendations, reminding us that great care needs to be taken of the Palestinian people in the occupied territories pending the realization of a final settlement.

Of relevance in that regard is the observation made by the Secretary-General in his report of 10 November 1998 to the General Assembly (A/53/652) that the Wye River Memorandum offers the Palestinian people economic opportunities that are essential if there is to be peace. The Secretary-General promises that the United Nations system will continue to support progress in the Israeli-Palestinian talks and provide economic, social and other assistance to the occupied territories.

Of relevance as well are the expressions of great generosity on the part of donor Governments towards the Palestinian people, which the General Assembly has heard expressed yesterday and today and for which, of course, warm appreciation must always be recorded.

The delegation of Sri Lanka joins in the hope expressed by so many yesterday and today that with the additional momentum provided by Wye and the cooperation and goodwill it could engender, a path will eventually be found to a just, comprehensive and lasting peace for all the peoples of the region.

Mr. Osei (Ghana): As the world marks the fiftieth anniversary of the forcible dispossession of the Palestinian people of their lands, homes and property, the international community's concerns over the slow progress of the peace process have been assuaged by recent positive developments, which culminated in the signing of the Wye accord on 23 October 1998.

Consequently, my delegation aligns itself with the unanimous expression of profound satisfaction with the accord, which signifies a restoration of mutual trust among the negotiating parties, thereby infusing a fresh impetus into the quest for a negotiated settlement of the Palestinian issue. We commend the laudable efforts of all parties, notably those of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat, President Clinton and King Hussein.

The Wye Memorandum has so far received only a cautious response from most Governments in the Middle East, particularly the Palestinians. The pessimism among Arabs stems from the long history and heritage of prolonged stalemates, reversals and prevarication that has inhibited the implementation of previous agreements.

A major threat to the current accord is the violent activities of extremist elements in both Israel and Palestine, whose primary objective is to scuttle the peace process. In this context, my delegation condemns the recent botched attack on Israeli schoolchildren, which led to the death of an Israeli soldier. Coming just after the signing of the Wye Memorandum, the attack was designed to subvert the peace process. As stated by the President of Ghana, Flight-Lieutenant Jerry John Rawlings, in the General Assembly recently,

> "Terrorist acts, in particular, are totally unacceptable as a means of seeking redress for any grievance, achieving political ends or supporting a cause." (*A/53/PV.9, p.6*)

Further acts of this kind cannot be ruled out. It is the conviction of my delegation that they should strengthen rather than weaken the resolve of the parties to proceed with the peace process. It is against this background that my delegation welcomes the prompt reaction of the Palestinian Authority to rein in the activities of suspected groups, an unequivocal demonstration of its commitment to the implementation of the Wye agreement and the entire peace process.

Similarly, we note with appreciation the Israeli Government's approval of the agreement and its subsequent withdrawal of Israeli troops from the town of Qabatiya — the first of three envisioned phased withdrawals of Israeli troops — and the release of 250 Palestinian prisoners. Also worth noting is the opening of a new Palestinian airport in Gaza. We urge the two partners to maintain the prevailing spirit of trust and compromise.

While the Memorandum has guaranteed a new momentum in the peace process, other thorny issues remain unresolved, including the future of Jerusalem, the return of Palestinian refugees and the release of all imprisoned Palestinians.

My Government reiterates its unwavering support for the inalienable right of the Palestinian people to establish an independent sovereign homeland with Jerusalem as its capital. The right of Palestinians to a State does not stem from the existing agreements, but is congruous with the Charter of the United Nations and established positions of the international community.

To that end, we regret the decision of the Government of Israel on 21 June 1998 to institute further measures to expand the jurisdiction and planned boundaries of Jerusalem. The underlying objective of the greater Jerusalem umbrella municipality, which includes settlements in the West Bank, is to link and strengthen the Jewish majority in the area. The decision is all the more regrettable because it is inconsistent with the spirit and the letter of the Oslo and Madrid peace accords.

Since the acquisition of territory by force is wrong under international law and infringes the Charter of the United Nations, my delegation reaffirms its opposition to Israel's illegal occupation of East Jerusalem and the establishment of other settlements on Palestinian lands and regards these as impediments to the peace process.

The continued deterioration of the socio-economic conditions of the Palestinian population are also a matter of grave concern. The plight of the Palestinians is aggravated by the frequent imposition of curfews and closures of the Gaza Strip by the Israeli authorities. The economic desperation of the Palestinians is reflected in their lukewarm response to the Wye accord.

To attain a durable peace, there must be economic development and improvement in the quality of life of the Palestinian people. We therefore welcome the decision of the Israeli Government and the Palestinian Authority to conclude an agreement on the establishment of an industrial estate at Karni in Gaza. This would help alleviate the plight of Palestinians by employing 40,000 workers. However, it needs to be stressed that the economic viability of the project ultimately depends on the cooperation of Israeli customs and security officials who control access through Israel to foreign markets.

In this regard, we also commend the efforts of the Commissioner-General of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) for his lucid report on the Agency's activities. UNRWA provides basic humanitarian assistance, such as education, health care, relief assistance and social services, to the refugees. Its peace implementation programme, which provides loans to small businesses, has enabled the refugees to participate in income-generating schemes. It is however regrettable that UNRWA's laudable efforts are being impeded by the financial difficulties that have compelled the agency to curtail some of its services, despite the deplorable living standards in the refugee camps. Consequently, we commend the donors that provided an additional contribution of $21 million in response to an appeal by the Agency in September 1997, and we reiterate our appeal to Member States, organizations and individuals to emulate this laudable gesture and contribute generously to the Agency to enable it to execute its programme of activities.

My delegation is equally concerned about policies and practices of the Israeli Government that clearly infringe the basic tenets of international humanitarian law, in particular the Geneva Convention relative to the Protection of Civilian Persons in Time of War, of 12 August 1949, and the international standards of human rights, in particular the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the International Covenants on Human Rights.

How can we justify a deliberate policy of land expropriation; restrictions with respect to land, housing and water; environmental damage through improper

waste disposal from settlements; burial of atomic waste on occupied lands; harassment of women, children and students; removal of persons from their homes and demolition of homes; separation of families and even spouses; unfair arrests, detention, torture, trial and imprisonment without due legal representation or respect for the basic principles of justice; and restrictions on movement within and from occupied lands and on re-entry into them.

My delegation believes that exigencies of national security can hardly justify such abuses, since the prevailing environment of insecurity in the Middle East is a direct consequence of these policies and practices.

The Wye accord should not exist in isolation; it should be the basis for reactivating the entire Middle East peace process for the attainment of a just, comprehensive and durable peace in the region. The Syrian and Lebanese tracks, in this connection, are indispensable links in any comprehensive settlement. Israel's continued occupation of portions of Lebanese territory constitutes an impediment to comprehensive peace in the region. Needless to say, guarantees of peace and security can be attained only through cooperation and cordial relations based on mutual respect for each other's sovereignty and territorial integrity. My delegation consequently supports Lebanon's insistence that Israel implement all provisions of the Security Council resolutions on the issue.

Similarly, Israel's withdrawal from the Golan Heights would attest to its sincerity and its desire to achieve a just, comprehensive and lasting peace. While urging Israel and Syria to resume negotiations on the issue, we believe that progress will be encouraged by the withdrawal of Israeli forces from the Golan Heights and its return to Syria.

Finally, my delegation is convinced that comprehensive peace and security will be achieved only through the full implementation of all relevant General Assembly and Security Council resolutions, notably Council resolutions 242 (1967), 338 (1973) and 425 (1978).

Mr. Al-Shammam (Yemen) (*interpretation from Arabic*): Yesterday we commemorated the International Day of Solidarity with the Palestinian People by reaffirming the inalienable right of the Palestinian people to self-determination and to the establishment of their own independent State on all their occupied territory.

The problem of Palestine is not a new question for this Organization. It is at the heart of the Middle East conflict. The General Assembly has dealt with this question over the last five decades and has adopted many resolutions that have not yet been implemented.

What distinguishes this session from other sessions is that the issue has undergone certain positive mutations, through the implementation of the Wye accord and the Declaration of Principles through the partial withdrawal of Israeli troops from the occupied Palestinian territories. In this regard, my delegation has welcomed the Declaration of Principles and the subsequent agreements, as well as all of the positive steps that have taken place in accordance with the principle of land for peace. We welcome in particular the bilateral agreements concerning the implementation of the Declaration of Principles regarding the West Bank, Gaza, the partial withdrawals from Hebron and the West Bank and the extension of Palestinian governance as a step towards the final goal of the establishment of the Palestinian state on Palestinian territory, with Jerusalem/Al-Quds as its capital.

We welcome as well the most recent agreement for a 13 per cent withdrawal from the West Bank territories. We thank the United States for its unceasing efforts in this regard — efforts to allow the Palestinian people to enjoy their right to self-determination and to expand the authority of their Government over the entire Palestinian territory.

My delegation reaffirms the importance of achieving speedy progress towards a final settlement leading to consecrating the legitimate rights of the Palestinian people, in particular their right to self-determination and to the establishment of an independent State with its capital at Al-Quds — in accordance with United Nations resolutions, international legitimacy and the basic principles of the Madrid Peace Conference, the Oslo accords and subsequent arrangements.

In addition, we urge the sponsors of the peace process and the international community to make all possible efforts to implement the agreements that have been reached between the two parties immediately and meticulously, including the withdrawal of Israeli forces from the territories occupied since 1967. Furthermore, my delegation would like to stress the importance of finding a solution to the problem of Palestinian refugees, the dismantling of the settlements that were established after 1967 and the abstention from changing the status of Al-Quds, which by prior agreement, has been postponed

to a later date. We also appeal to States to respect the relevant Security Council resolutions.

On the other hand, my delegation appeals to the international community in general to provide due assistance to the Palestinian National Authority to enable it to cope with its responsibilities as regards combating the poverty and unemployment that have resulted from the occupation and to provide economic and social assistance allowing the Palestinian people to build its economic and social institutions. This would have a positive effect on the restoration of peace and security in the region.

My delegation asks that the United Nations play a more active role, a role of a broader scope, in the present peace process and in the implementation of the Declaration of Principles. In addition, the United Nations, has a permanent responsibility towards the question of Palestine until such time as it is finally resolved in all its aspects and in a just and comprehensive manner, in accordance with the resolutions of international legitimacy.

Mr. Yel'chenko (Ukraine): Among the dozens of present-day unsettled disputes that have an unfavourable impact on international peace and security, the question of Palestine — the core of the Arab-Israeli conflict — is rated as the most complicated and sensitive one. For decades, the United Nations and the international community at large have been undertaking strenuous efforts to resolve this conflict. Regrettably, this objective remains unrealized, although it does not seem to be unattainable.

The course of events of the past year, and especially those of the past few weeks, give us some encouragement. Thanks to persistent international mediatory efforts, in particular those of the United States, as well as to the political will and the sense of responsibility of the parties involved, we have witnessed a real breakthrough in a deadlock situation in the negotiating process that had lasted for almost 19 months. Ukraine joined the international community in welcoming the signing on 23 October 1998 of the Wye River Memorandum. In its statement on this event, distributed as an official document of the General Assembly at this session, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Ukraine stressed, in particular, that in our country the conclusion of this agreement was perceived as evidence that even the most complicated and protracted conflicts can and should be settled by peaceful means through negotiations.

We are also much gratified by the fact that despite the attempts by radical forces on both sides to block the implementation of the Wye Memorandum, its ratification by the Israeli Knesset on 17 November made it possible for this important document to start working. In this context, we welcome the start of the permanent status negotiations, as well as the first further redeployment of Israeli troops from parts of the West Bank. We believe that a spirit of compromise and political wisdom, as well as mutual compliance with their previous commitments, will lead the parties to the full and speedy implementation of the Memorandum and bring closer a comprehensive resolution of the whole issue.

At the same time, our country is deeply alarmed by the fact that abhorrent terrorist activities in the region have not ceased and continue to undermine the fragile peace process, victimizing the innocent civilian population. In view of the most recent terrorist attacks, I would like again to record Ukraine's strong condemnation of any acts of terrorism by whomsoever committed and whatever their motivations may be. We believe that the full implementation by the parties of all security provisions outlined in the Wye Memorandum, especially in outlawing and combating terrorist organizations, is vitally important to this end.

It is evident that both sides should demonstrate restraint and tolerance. Only on this basis can we expect further movement in the right direction. We encourage the parties to stick to the path of negotiations leading to a comprehensive and just settlement of the Palestine question, which can be achieved only on the basis of implementation by the parties of Security Council resolutions 242 (1967) and 338 (1973), including the principle of land for peace, and in accordance with the bilateral agreements signed to date.

With regard to the issue of settlement construction activities, as well as of Jerusalem, Ukraine shares the relevant assessment given by the participants in the open debate held in the Security Council on 30 June and joins the call addressed to the Israeli Government in the statement by the President of the Security Council of 13 July 1998 (S/PRST/1998/21) not to proceed with these activities and not to pre-empt the outcome of the permanent status negotiations, including the most sensitive issue of Jerusalem.

Apart from this, Ukraine favours the implementation of recommendations contained in the resolutions of the tenth emergency special session of the General Assembly, with a view to convening a conference of the High Contracting Parties to the Fourth Geneva Convention.

However, in our view, the timing of this conference should be considered very carefully in order not to hamper the course of the present negotiations and the redeployment process now under way.

Our delegation remains convinced that the United Nations, which is to a large extent the original initiator of settling the question of Palestine, should continue to shoulder its primary responsibility for ensuring the exercise by the Palestinian people of its inalienable rights, including the right to self-determination and its own statehood. This world Organization should remain a principal guarantor of international legitimacy with respect to the question of Palestine and a major headquarters of international support of and assistance to the Palestinian people.

Undoubtedly, any effort to achieve a peaceful settlement of the question of Palestine should take into account the urgent need for social and economic development in the Palestinian territory. In this respect, we think that priority attention should be given to the joint Palestinian-Israeli economic projects aimed at facilitating economic growth and stability in those lands.

Ukraine commends the efforts of the international donor community and the United Nations family of organizations in providing substantial and tangible assistance to the Palestinian people and stands ready for closer economic cooperation with it on both a bilateral and a multilateral basis.

In this context, we are gratified by the results of the donors Conference to Support Middle East Peace and Development held yesterday in Washington, D.C., at which some $3 billion was pledged in assistance to the Palestinian Authority for a variety of development projects.

We note with satisfaction the further development of Ukrainian-Palestinian bilateral relations over the past year, including the first visit to Ukraine of the delegation of the Palestinian Legislative Council, as well as a number of important high-level meetings held at different international forums and in the Palestinian territories. During all those meetings, prospects were broadly addressed for joint projects with Ukraine's involvement in developing the industrial infrastructure of the Palestinian territory and providing educational training for the Palestinians. We hope that all of those projects will be finalized and soon come into effect.

In conclusion, I would like to reconfirm Ukraine's strong interest in the settlement of the question of Palestine. People in Ukraine are very hopeful that in the near future the time will come when the United Nations will turn the last page in the long history of this issue, once the rights of the Palestinian people have been fully realized.

Mr. Kpotsra (Togo)(*interpretation from French*): If there are issues around which national public opinion forms a judgement as to the role and efficacy of the United Nations, the question of Palestine, which is at the heart of the Israeli-Arab crisis and which has had the attention of the entire world for half a century, is certainly one of them. This is a gauge of the great importance of the debate to which this issue regularly gives rise, a debate that only articulates the keen concerns felt by the international community in this regard.

Thus it was last year that the General Assembly adopted resolution 52/52 by an overwhelming majority, whereby it recalled that the settlement of the question of Palestine must be based on abidance by certain fundamental principles of international law and of the United Nations Charter, as well as the implementation of agreements made.

A year later, we are compelled to note that the peace process in the Middle East has long been stalled and that no substantive progress has been made in the implementation of the recently concluded agreements. The situation on the ground, including the economic situation and the living conditions of the Palestinian people, continues to deteriorate. Moreover, millions of Palestinians continue to live in precarious conditions in refugee camps. They are enduring the adverse consequences of Israel's stepped-up occupation policies and practices, which not only constitute a serious violation of the provisions of the Fourth Geneva Convention relative to the Protection of Civilian Persons in Time of War, of 12 August 1949, and of pertinent Security Council resolutions, but also run counter to the peace process begun in Madrid and to subsequent agreements.

To be sure, despite everything, the international community has made tireless efforts in pursuit of this process. In this vein, my delegation thanks the Secretary-General for his initiatives to defend and promote the rights of the Palestinian people and especially welcomes the assistance offered by the Organization to the Palestinian people in the economic and social spheres. We also wish to praise the work of the Committee on the

Exercise of the Inalienable Rights of the Palestinian People, which has striven to rally the international community in support of a comprehensive, just and lasting settlement of the question of Palestine.

The adoption by the General Assembly on 18 November of a resolution entitled "Bethlehem 2000" was yet another clear signal of the international community's determination to contribute in every way possible to restoring peace to the region. There is no doubt that making the Bethlehem 2000 project a reality will encourage the pursuit of the peace process and reconciliation.

If it is to be viable and lasting, peace in the Middle East must rest on the solid foundations of justice, respect for human rights and humanitarian law, and relations based on the principles of equality and partnership between neighbours. Above all, however, this long-sought peace must follow the cessation of the unilateral measures that have jeopardized the peace process for far too long. It also depends on the rigorous and good-faith implementation of commitments undertaken and on the determination of the parties to avoid recourse to one-upmanship and to reject all reckless and extremist moves.

That is why the Government of Togo strongly welcomes the United States initiatives that led to the signing of the Wye River Memorandum. Unquestionably, the Memorandum represents a fresh start to the peace process, to which it has given new impetus that we must maintain and strengthen at all costs.

More than ever before, the sponsors of the peace process, the Security Council and the entire international community must do all they can steadfastly and sustainedly to support the process. The ultimate goal, need we recall, includes not only the recognition of the right of all States of the region, including Israel, to live in peace within secure and internationally recognized borders, but also and especially the establishment of an independent Palestinian State.

The United Nations ongoing responsibility, which it must bear until a satisfactory settlement based on international law can be reached, also requires the Organization's role in the Middle East peace process to be expanded and strengthened. From the same perspective, and in the interests of peace and security throughout the Middle East region, we hope that the Israeli Government will show the same determination to settle the issues of southern Lebanon and the Syrian Golan that we would have it focus on the question of Palestine. It is obvious that peace and reconciliation cannot be achieved in the region so long as the policies and practices currently in effect in southern Lebanon are pursued and the Golan has not been returned to Syria.

The agreement that emerged from the Wye Plantation meetings has rekindled a semblance of hope for a settlement of the question of Palestine and, on that basis, of the Israeli-Arab crisis as a whole. Indeed, the agreement has opened the door to final status negotiations. If the impetus it has given to the peace process is to be maintained, the parties must exercise enormous restraint and much self-discipline throughout the dealings ahead.

As an eminent statesman said a few days ago said before the Representative Council of Jewish Institutions in France:

> "In opening these negotiations, the two parties are embarking on a crossing which they know to be fraught with risk. There will certainly be squalls, perhaps storms. But they have no choice but to make the journey. Reconciliation, peace, real security and economic development await them on the far shore."

Mr. Insanally (Guyana): Unlike past occasions when we have met to consider the question of Palestine, there is this time a prevailing sense of cautious optimism about its eventual resolution. The Wye River Memorandum that was signed in Washington, D.C., on 23 October 1998 by the Prime Minister of Israel and the President of the Palestinian Authority has given the peace process a new momentum towards progress.

At the end of October, an expert meeting on the Fourth Geneva Convention of 1949 took place in Geneva in response to the resolutions adopted at the meetings of the tenth emergency special session. Hopefully, as a result of those deliberations, we will now be able to convene a conference of the High Contracting Parties to the Convention. Most recently, in accordance with the Wye agreements, Israel happily withdrew more of its troops from the West Bank and, also as part of the overall agreement, the Palestinian airport in Gaza was finally opened, giving the Authority and the Palestinian people a further degree of self-determination and autonomy. Most encouraging is that, as a result of the Wye River Memorandum, final status talks between Israel and the Palestinian Authority are scheduled to commence in the near future.

The invigoration of the peace process has clearly brought renewed hope to the peoples of the Middle East and given them a chance finally to resolve matters that have bedeviled them, their region and the international community for 50 years. The Government of Guyana urges both Israel and the Palestinian Authority to fully implement not only the agreements reached at Wye last month, but also others which have been concluded over the years. Too much time has already been lost and too much is at stake to allow this very unique opportunity to dissipate. For this reason, any further attempt to halt the implementation of those agreements must be strongly condemned and discouraged by the international community. The United Nations, which has always been involved in this issue, must remain vigilant to ensure that the parties directly concerned work together to fulfil their joint obligations.

It is imperative now that appropriate machinery be put in place to address problems and misunderstandings that are likely to arise. The 19 months of stalemate prior to Wye showed that retreating into intransigence and making unilateral manoeuvres are counterproductive to the process. Both parties need to nurture the working relationship which they resuscitated at Wye and to preserve the spirit of goodwill and compromise that prevailed at that meeting. Constant and open communication between them will certainly help to sustain the peace process.

It may seem that all of this has been said before, but, given the protracted situation in the Middle East, reminders are often needed to keep the parties and, indeed, the international community focused on what has to be done to move things along. There is one requirement that should not be forgotten: the question of Palestine must be resolved through a just, comprehensive and definitive peace in the Middle East, and for this to be achieved, not only must the Palestinians be allowed to exercise their inalienable rights, but the disputes between Israel and Syria and Israel and Lebanon, which are linked to the core issue, must also be resolved. Accordingly, the talks between these parties need to be resumed in the context of Security Council resolution 242 (1967). The peace process is based significantly on the principle of land for peace. That principle cannot be overlooked or abandoned at any time.

As the search for the resolution of these issues continues, the Secretary-General's report on the item reminds us of the tragic plight of the Palestinian people. Despite several United Nations resolutions calling on Israel to cease its repression, that nation continues its settlement activities in Palestine and the occupied territories. Palestinian and other Arab lands and property are being constantly confiscated and many homes demolished daily. Thousands of Palestinians remain imprisoned in Israel amid graphic reports of their torture and abuse. Now that the Government of Israel has expanded the boundaries of Jerusalem and created an umbrella municipality to administer it, it is feared that this development may serve to worsen the plight of the Palestinians. Very distressing, of course, is the negative impact on the Palestinian economy caused by closures of the West Bank and the Gaza Strip during the year, and by unremitting water shortages, which have affected agricultural production and the living conditions of the Palestinian people.

There is no doubt that as the Palestinians wait for a stable peace, their present circumstances require urgent attention. The international community must do all it can to alleviate the hardships to which the Palestinians continue to be exposed.

In commemorating our solidarity with their cause today, the Government and the people of Guyana are pleased to renew their pledge of full support. We believe that the Palestinian people will be ultimately successful in their struggle, since, as history has shown time and again, justice will in the end prevail over injustice.

Mr. Jele (South Africa): South Africa remains committed to the struggle of the Palestinian people to achieve self- determination and national independence.

My delegation believes that the settlement of the question of Palestine and the achievement of a just and comprehensive peace in the Middle East are interdependent processes. The materialization of endurable peace will require nothing less than the full restoration and recognition of the inalienable right of the Palestinian people to self-determination and the complete restoration of all Arab territories occupied since 1967.

In this context, it is worth recalling the decisions of the twelfth summit of the Movement of Non-Aligned Countries, held in Durban in September 1998. The heads of State or Government of the countries of the Non-Aligned Movement reiterated their support for the inalienable rights of the Palestinian people, including their right to return to their homeland and to have their own independent State with Jerusalem as its capital.

They also reiterated their demand for the withdrawal of Israel, the occupying Power, from all occupied Palestinian territory, including Jerusalem, and the other Arab territories occupied since 1967, and reaffirmed their

position on occupied East Jerusalem, the illegal Israeli settlements and the applicability of the Fourth Geneva Convention of 1949 to all the occupied Palestinian territory, including Jerusalem.

Despite the many provocations and violent actions on the part of those opposed to peace, the seemingly endless tragedy of lives wasted and deferred social and economic progress, the constant theme in negotiations, from Madrid through Oslo to Wye River, has been "land for peace". Therefore, attempts to replace the policy of land for peace with "security for peace" will invariably lead to increased tension and instability in the region and beyond.

South Africa welcomes the signing in Washington on 23 October 1998 of the Wye River agreement between Prime Minister Netanyahu and President Arafat. The Wye River process once again demonstrates that only through sustained dialogue will the path towards a comprehensive, just and equitable resolution of the question of Palestine and the Middle East conflict be made feasible.

But, as post-Wye River events have shown, such positive steps do not in and of themselves constitute a measure of sustained progress. This requires of the parties to the agreements the practical and honest implementation of decisions agreed upon. In this connection, South Africa would like to commend the Palestinian side's reaffirmation of its commitment to implement the provisions of the Wye River agreement and of all earlier agreements.

However, the conditional acceptance by the Israeli Government of the Wye River agreement and the apparent lack of political and moral commitment on its part to implement all of its obligations remains a disturbing trend.

We therefore call on the Israeli Government to desist from provocative acts and violations of the spirit and the letter of the accords and to cease the continued policies and practices relating to new Israeli settlements intended to alter the demographic reality. It is also a matter of grave concern that Palestinians continue to be subjected to repressive and restrictive measures affecting their free movement and economic activity.

We strongly condemn the perpetration of violent incidents designed to disrupt the positive impetus created after the Wye River agreement and reiterate our recent calls to all parties concerned not to allow acts of this nature, perpetrated by extremists, to derail the peace process.

My delegation, remaining hopeful that courageous and bold decisions will be taken to effect progress that will ultimately lead to peace in all areas, will vote in favour of the draft resolutions before us.

Mr. Elaraby (Egypt)(*interpretation from Arabic*): The world observes 30 November as a day of solidarity with the Palestinian people. This year the world commemorates the fiftieth anniversary of the beginning of Palestinian suffering — "the catastrophe", as the Palestinians call it — and the displacement and diaspora of millions of people. On 29 November 1947, the General Assembly adopted resolution 181 (II), which altered the face of history in the Middle East and divided Palestine into two States: a Jewish State and an Arab State for Christians and Muslims. The resolution also established an independent legal status for the city of Jerusalem.

The Jewish State was established within a few months of the adoption of the resolution. The declaration announcing its creation stated that it was established on the basis of the General Assembly resolution. Yet to date the Arab State has never come into being, for many reasons and because of circumstances the scope of which we could not cover in this statement. Fifty years have gone by, numerous wars have been fought and peace treaties have been signed. Yet the question of Palestine is still on the agenda of the General Assembly.

I believe that it is important to provide that background, the Palestinian question, enabling all of us to have a clear understanding about the primary role and the historical responsibility of the United Nations in this regard until a just, lasting and comprehensive settlement is reached. This will come about with the establishment of the State of Palestine.

Five decades after the beginning of the Arab-Israeli conflict, the international community realizes — now more than ever before — that the Palestinian question constitutes the core of this conflict. Without reaching a fair and lasting settlement of that question, the Middle East region, will, unfortunately, remain a region pervaded by tension and instability.

It is also important for the Israeli side to recognize that fact; no one should be under the illusion that temporary solutions can provide long-term peace or that partial agreements can be a substitute for a durable and comprehensive settlement of the Palestinian question.

The peace that we seek for our region is a peace that is comprehensive, lasting and just, one that will lead to the exercise by the Palestinian people of all of their natural rights, foremost among them the establishment of an independent state on their territory.

Mr. Filippi Balestra (San Marino), Vice-President, took the Chair.

After 19 years of procrastination, prevarication, and delay on the part of the Israeli Administration, on 23 October the Palestinian and Israeli sides signed a memorandum of understanding to implement a number of arrangements that were included in past transitional agreements. Egypt welcomes that agreement, the Wye River Memorandum, which resulted from a much-appreciated American effort, whereby a number of arrangements embodied in prior transitional agreements are to be implemented. Egypt welcomes the implementation of the Wye River Memorandum as well as of any other agreement that could be reached by the two sides. We hope that that agreement will be scrupulously implemented within its agreed time-frame. Egypt also stresses that other transitional arrangements must be finalized before proceeding to negotiations on the final settlement, the most important of which are the third phase of Israeli withdrawal, safe passage between the West Bank and the Gaza Strip and the operation of the port of Gaza, among others. Egypt is closely following the developments relating to the implementation of the Wye River Memorandum. In this regard, I should like to take this opportunity to congratulate the Palestinian delegation on the opening of Gaza International Airport on 24 November.

It is unfortunate that the Israeli Government is undertaking a number of unilateral actions aimed at bolstering the illegal position of its settlers in the occupied Palestinian territories, including Jerusalem, thereby violating all the relevant United Nations resolutions as well as its international obligations as the occupying Power, in accordance with the provisions of the Fourth Geneva Convention, which prohibits the occupying Power from, *inter alia*, transferring its civilian inhabitants to the territories it occupies.

In this context, Egypt is following with great concern media reports regarding the persistent measures by numerous Israeli groups and personalities to cement the illegal de facto Israeli presence in the Palestinian territories under Israeli occupation. These efforts are being echoed by officials within the Israeli Government who are encouraging its settlers to expropriate more land by force. While Egypt expresses its deep regret at such provocative statements, which flout international law, it urges the international community to fulfil its responsibilities in this regard.

Here I should like to focus on an important fact: it is impossible to establish real peace in the Middle East as long as Israel continues its settlerist policy. Egypt's position on this issue is clear. In 1979, Egypt signed a Peace Treaty with Israel by which Israel restored to Egypt all its territory in full. This constitutes a foundational precedent for the establishment of peace between Israel and the Arab parties. It also represents the appropriate interpretation of Security Council resolution 242 (1967). Furthermore, it places on Egypt a heavy responsibility to reject any efforts on the part of the Israelis to impose settlerism on the Palestinian side as a fait accompli that must be acquiesced in. The foundations of the peace that Egypt established with Israel were, first, the application of the principle of land for peace, which called for withdrawal from all the occupied territories; secondly, the removal from all territories of any and all Israeli settlements; and, thirdly, the setting up of reciprocal security arrangements. Egypt believes that those bases should be applied with regard to peace between Israel and the other Arab parties.

We are also following with particular concern the consistent and intensive Israeli activities aimed at changing the geographic and demographic nature of the city of Jerusalem, either through emptying it of its Palestinian residents and forcing them to leave or through the intensification of the drive to construct and expand settlements within East Jerusalem and its surroundings so as to consolidate its illegal annexation by Israel. In so doing, Israel is clearly violating the principles of international relations which are set forth in all the relevant United Nations resolutions, especially Security Council resolutions 465 (1980) and 478 (1980), as well as the provisions of the Fourth Geneva Convention. Israel, by these actions, is also ignoring the arrangements that it agreed to in the Oslo agreement, whereby the future status of the city of Jerusalem would be one of the issues to be addressed in the final status negotiations.

Before concluding, I should like to express my extreme dismay at the statement made yesterday in the Assembly by the representative of Israel. Peace requires all of us, whether Arab or Israeli, to set aside the historical aspect of the conflict and to disregard the past, with all its negative aspects. Peace also requires us to look forward with hope to the future, with all the positive

aspects that it can bring. It is evident that the statement made by the delegation of Israel contravenes the requirements of peace. The statement has led us to wonder again through the labyrinth of ancient history. It contained many falsehoods, which are known as such to everyone.

I do not intend to respond in detail to the representative of Israel, but there are certain basic historical facts that relate to Egypt and the area which I must briefly elucidate.

First, it was the leadership of Arab Palestine under the Mandate, which represented 65 per cent of the population of Palestine, that asked the Arab States for help in 1948. This was in exercise of the legitimate right of collective self-defence and to avoid the loss of more territories after that leadership, finding itself unable to withstand the campaigns of Zionist terrorist groups such as the Irgun and Stern gang, which, as is well-known, were responsible for the assassination of Count Folke Bernadotte, the representative of the Secretary-General in Palestine. That is the true history.

Secondly, contrary to what the representative of Israel has claimed, the West Bank and Gaza are not disputed territories. They are territories occupied by Israel, as is confirmed by the resolutions of the Security Council and the General Assembly, as well as by the provisions of international law. Israel must withdraw from those territories.

Thirdly, the Gaza Strip has never been under Egyptian occupation, as claimed by the representative of Israel. Egypt exercised transitional administration over the Strip, in accordance with the Armistice Agreement signed with Israel on 24 February 1949 and adopted later by the Security Council, until peace was achieved in the area. There is no comparison between the Egyptian transitional administration of the Gaza Strip, and Israel's occupation of it. This is the true history.

Fourthly, history will recall that it was Israel which was in collusion with European States in 1956 in attacking Egypt. History will also recall that Israel, in spite of what the representative of Israel may now say, initiated the attack on Egypt on 5 June 1967. That attack was premeditated, organized and well planned for years, as has been admitted by the Israelis themselves in books and testimonials which are there for all to see. This is the true history.

Fifthly, as for the falsehoods raised by the Israeli representative regarding Security Council resolution 242 (1967), suffice it to rebut them by what I have said in this statement. To this, I may add that the Security Council functions in accordance with the provisions of the Charter and the rules of international law. These stipulate that the territories that were occupied must be evacuated, and that the Security Council does not have the authority to dispose of territories of States. As was said in 1967, following the adoption by the Security Council of resolution 242 (1967),

(Spoke in English)

> the Council is not in the real estate business to dispense with the territories of other countries.

(Spoke in Arabic)

I did not wish to have the Israeli representative involve us in polemics which are not called for. However, he insisted on voicing publicly here, in this bastion of international legitimacy, views fit only for consumption in Israel. What he said here is not material for well-considered and honest presentation to the representatives of the international community gathered here in the General Assembly. What is required of all of us is to look to a better future in which a just and comprehensive peace will be achieved for all.

In conclusion, I wish to say that a just settlement of the Palestinian question is the key to achieving peace in the Middle East. Without reaching such a settlement, the region will remain on the brink of tension, violence and instability.

Egypt endeavours with all its resources to achieve such a just settlement. We hope that Israel will equally show seriousness in working to achieve peace in the region, not only through the conclusion of short-term and partial solutions, but by reaching a comprehensive settlement acceptable to the Palestinian side, which has for 50 years endured this suffering that must come to an end soon.

Mr. Waheed (Pakistan): As an annual feature of the General Assembly, we are again today considering the question of Palestine, which reflects our unswerving collective commitment to a lasting solution of this problem.

It is our firm belief that no durable peace in the Middle East is possible without achieving a peaceful settlement of the question of Palestine. The realization of the inalienable rights of the Palestinian people and the withdrawal of Israel from the Palestinian territories are essential for any meaningful progress in the peace process.

Pakistan's support of the just struggle for the inalienable rights of the Palestinian people is well known. We have always called for the implementation of Security Council resolutions 242 (1967), 338 (1973) and 425 (1978), which provide the framework for a durable and comprehensive peace in the Middle East.

The international community has been closely monitoring the recent developments concerning the negotiations between Israel and the Palestinian authorities. We are heartened by the progress made towards the resumption of the Middle East peace process and the conclusion of Wye River Memorandum on 23 October 1998. The agreement must be implemented in full with a view to restoring the atmosphere of confidence, which, we believe, would enable them to move towards the permanent status negotiations as envisaged in the Oslo agreements.

We note with appreciation the political determination and sagacious policies of the Palestinian leadership to pursue the cause of peace with justice, which should be reciprocated by all concerned. We would like once again to reiterate our whole-hearted support to the Palestinian leadership in all its efforts towards achieving a lasting peace.

The special significance of the Holy City of Al-Quds al-Sharif for the international community in general and the Islamic Ummah in particular, requires no elaboration. We believe that Al-Quds al-Sharif, occupied by Israel since 1967, remains central to any comprehensive settlement. No lasting peace is possible without the return of Al-Quds al-Sharif and all occupied territories to the Palestinian people.

We welcome the General Assembly's adoption under agenda item 157 of the resolution entitled "Bethlehem 2000", which is a clear manifestation of the commitment of the international community towards the people of Palestine and their prosperity. The Israeli authorities must respond to the appeal made in the resolution for ensuring free and unhindered access to the holy places in Bethlehem to the faithful of all religions and citizens of all nationalities. It is our earnest hope that the international community, particularly the donor countries and the United Nations agencies, will extend its support and cooperation to the Bethlehem 2000 project so that the project can be implemented as envisaged in the annex to General Assembly document A/53/141 of 15 May 1998.

The Palestinian National Authority is in need of substantial economic assistance to alleviate the sufferings of the Palestinian people and to re-build their devastated economy. It is imperative that the international community, particularly the United Nations, continue to encourage, assist and support the peace process and provide urgent assistance to the Palestinian National Authority.

In conclusion, I would like to reaffirm to our Palestinian brethren that Pakistan will continue to extend its principled and firm support for their just struggle to achieve their legitimate right to sovereign existence and for their desire to live in peace, with honour and dignity.

Mr. Hachani (Tunisia) (*interpretation from Arabic*): As it has done for more than half a century, the General Assembly at its fifty-third session is once again considering the question of Palestine. This endows the question with special importance, given the sensitive situation in the occupied territories and in the Middle East in general. With the passage of time, especially since the conclusion of the Oslo accords, the Declaration of Principles and the other subsequent arrangements, and given the high hopes and expectations generated by these agreements for the possible establishment of a just, lasting and comprehensive peace in the region, it became more and more certain that the implementation on the ground of those objectives will be accelerated to make irreversible the dynamic of peace, and to achieve all the goals we are pursuing.

Like other peace-loving countries, Tunisia has long warned here of the threat of an explosion in the region posed by the deadlock in the peace process which will suffer a setback if Israel fails to fulfil the commitments it made in the agreements it has concluded with the Palestinian side. Moreover, Israel has halted negotiations on the Syrian and Lebanese tracks, thus reneging on the peace process and on the principles on which it is based, notably that of land for peace.

Tunisia therefore acknowledges the importance of the signing by the Palestinian and Israeli sides of the Wye River Memorandum of 23 October 1998, and appreciates the efforts the United States made to achieve that agreement.

The negative developments in the peace process over the past two years show how necessary it is for the parties to fulfil their commitments under the agreements they have concluded. It is no secret that the success of any agreement is measured by the extent to which the parties to the agreement respect its provisions and abide by its requirements. Although the Palestinian side has fulfilled all its contractual commitments, Israel continues to prevaricate and to shirk its responsibilities. Consequently, Israel is obliged to respect scrupulously and unconditionally the Wye River Memorandum which it signed, and which reaffirms the provisions of previous agreements. The Israeli Government should end its policy of procrastination and demonstrate the good faith required of it to guarantee success on all the negotiating tracks and to build confidence with the Palestinian side. In this context, Israel can do this by being faithful and honest with regard to all its commitments under those agreements. Israel must implement the staged withdrawal from the occupied Palestinian territories. It must also resume negotiations immediately with the Palestinians on a final solution with a view to completing them by the end of the transitional phase in May 1999. Israel must also renounce all unilateral action that could have an adverse impact on the results of the negotiations, including, in particular, the construction of settlements on Palestinian territory and in East Jerusalem. Israel must further put an end to its other illegal actions, which are aimed at changing the demographic composition, and eliminating the Arab and Islamic character of Al-Quds and at its Judaization. Those actions run counter to the provisions of General Assembly and Security Council resolutions and to the Fourth Geneva Convention, relative to the Protection of Civilian Persons in Time of War, of 12 August 1949.

Israel should renounce once and for all policies of collective punishment and economic blockades against the Palestinian people, along with other illegal practices, and it should release Palestinian prisoners in accordance with the agreements it has signed. Israel must also prove its good faith towards the other Arab parties by returning to the negotiations table with Syria and Lebanon so that those two brotherly States can regain their usurped territories — the occupied Golan and southern Lebanon — in accordance with Security Council resolutions 242 (1967), 338 (1973) and 425 (1978).

The President of Tunisia, Mr. Zine El Abidine Ben Ali, has stressed that the peace process must be protected from any interruption or regression, because the future of the entire region depends upon the achievement of a just, comprehensive and lasting peace. The international community should continue to be vigilant and firm in its efforts to establish the peace which we desire in the Middle East.

Here I would like to quote from the message from President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali on the occasion of the International Day of Solidarity with the Palestinian People. The message reads in part,

> "Tunisia calls on the international community, particularly the co-sponsors of the peace process and the European Union, to step up their endeavours in support of the peace process and the furthering of the international legitimacy in which it is based in order to create an atmosphere conducive to a just, comprehensive and lasting solution which would guarantee the inalienable rights of the Palestinian people, to restore to Syria and Lebanon their territories now under occupation and to enable the peoples of the region to live in security, peace and prosperity."

In addition, the United Nations, particularly the General Assembly, have a permanent responsibility towards the Palestinian people. This responsibility must continue to be shouldered because of the two States which were issued birth certificates by the United Nations in 1947, only the Jewish State was established, while the Palestinian State has yet to be established. The Palestinian people continues to aspire to the establishment of a State of its own, on its own territory. In that connection, we welcome the resolution adopted by the General Assembly last July enhancing the observer status of Palestine.

The United Nations is the guarantor and protector of principles of international legitimacy regarding the question of Palestine and the question of the Middle East in general. This is a political role which must continue. Parallel to this, the United Nations has another distinctive role which should be continued and bolstered: to mobilize international resources to provide economic assistance to the Palestinian people, and to ensure that the United Nations contributes to and coordinates such assistance. The economic and social development of the occupied Palestinian territories is an important factor in the efforts to establish peace. We urge the international community and donor countries to continue their assistance to the Palestinian people, to help the Palestinians improve their living conditions, and to support the efforts of the

Palestinian Authority to mobilize the resources and capacities necessary for economic and social development.

Tunisia has consistently supported the peace process and its progress throughout all its stages, out of our support for justice and in view of our solidarity with the brotherly Palestinian people with a view to the full recovery of their legitimate rights, in particular their right to the establishment of an independent State of their own on their own territory, with Al-Quds as its capital.

As the United Nations marks the International Day of Solidarity with the Palestinian People, Tunisia reaffirms that it will continue to be a firm and strong supporter of that people in its struggle to exercise its right of self-determination and its right to live a decent life.

In conclusion, I would like to pay tribute to the important role played by the Committee on the Exercise of the Inalienable Rights of the Palestinian People under the chairmanship of Ambassador Ibra Ka in advancing and defending those rights. The report of the Committee to the General Assembly on its activities over the past year attests to that role.

Mr. Danesh-Yazdi (Islamic Republic of Iran): For more than half a century, the question of Palestine has been one of the prominent concerns of the international community. The Palestinian issue and the plight of Palestinian people remain the foremost cause of concern not only for the Islamic States but for many other nations of the world as well. Accordingly, the Islamic Republic of Iran is of the view that the Palestinian tragedy and the calamity faced by the Palestinian people due to Israeli occupation and oppression need to be accorded the highest priority and attention by the international community, in particular by the General Assembly, as the principal and the most authoritative universal body of the entire United Nations system.

We note with satisfaction the conspicuous contribution made by the General Assembly to address the Palestinian issue through the convening of its emergency special session and the adoption of crucial decisions, especially when the Security Council was rendered incapable of fulfilling its responsibilities due to the exercise of the veto power by a member of the Council. The exercise of the veto prompted the General Assembly to convene the tenth emergency special session to discuss the illegal Israeli actions in occupied East Jerusalem and the rest of occupied Palestinian territory.

That emergency special session produced important resolutions — in particular resolution ES-10/5 of 17 March 1998 — in which it reiterated, *inter alia*, condemnation of the Israeli regime for its failure to comply with the provisions of previous resolutions and stressed that all requirements prescribed in those resolutions should be fully and immediately implemented by Israel. The resolution further recommended the convening of a conference on measures to enforce the Fourth Geneva Convention in the occupied Palestinian territory in order to ensure the protection of the Palestinian people.

The international outrage against and condemnation of Israel have not, unfortunately, changed the pattern of its inhuman behaviour towards the Palestinian people and its illegal policies in the occupied territories. In this context, the report of the Committee on the Exercise of the Inalienable Rights of the Palestinian People, contained in document A/53/35, presents a harrowing picture of the current situation in the occupied territories, which is marked by brutal practices and every imaginable tactic on the part of the Israeli regime aimed at depriving the Palestinian people of the exercise of their legitimate rights.

The report refers to a great number of confiscations of Palestinian lands and the demolition of their houses throughout the occupied Palestinian territory, including Jerusalem, in pursuance of the stated Israeli policy. As a consequence of the unlawful settlement policy, thousands of Palestinians have been forced to leave their ancestral lands or have been displaced. The report further details that settlers have on numerous occasions provoked violent confrontations with Palestinian civilians by moving illegally into Palestinian areas and forcibly occupying or beginning the construction of new housing, under Israeli police protection.

The continued imprisonment of thousands of Palestinian and Arab prisoners in Israeli jails has attracted the attention as well as the condemnation of the international community. The human rights treaty bodies have confirmed that these detainees have been subjected to psychological and physical torture by the Israeli authorities, resulting in a considerable deterioration of their health. The Israeli regime should be forced to heed the call of the international community to stop the ill treatment of prisoners, release these detainees, return the deportees and put an end to the infamous practice of collective punishment.

The agony is deepened when we recall that 4 million Palestinians still live in diaspora, in refugee camps under precarious conditions. The Israeli policy of intimidation and forcible occupation, as well as the use of brute force, has been implemented in such a manner as to perpetuate their refugee status. The continuation of this unjust situation would undoubtedly prolong their suffering. It is thus incumbent upon the international community to bring this bleak situation to an end.

The Palestinian economic situation is a showcase of hardship and misery. The illegal measures taken by Israeli authorities, including the application of unjust limitations on public services, closures and the imposition of restrictions on the movement of persons and goods have severely deteriorated the living conditions of the Palestinian people.

The question of Palestine would not be properly dealt with without addressing the issue of Al-Quds al-Sharif, which is of paramount importance for the entire Islamic world. The obstinate Israeli policy of altering the Islamic character of Jerusalem through the continuous and persistent process of Judaization of the city has prompted indignation and anguish among Muslims throughout the world. The continued use of a tunnel opened in the vicinity of the Al-Aqsa Mosque in 1996, the construction of Jewish settlements in East Jerusalem and the newly announced creation of an umbrella municipality that expands the borders of Jerusalem and extends the administrative powers of the illegal municipality over nearby areas are intended to change the legal, religious and demographic composition of the Holy City of Al-Quds al-Sharif, thus creating a fait accompli in this respect. Such acts and policies have been conducted in flagrant infringement of various resolutions of the Security Council and the General Assembly. The Organization of the Islamic Conference, which owes its very *raison d'etre* to the Muslims' response to an act of arson against the Al-Aqsa Mosque in 1969, has constantly condemned the Israeli acts and called for action to put an end to the practices of the Israeli occupying authorities in Jerusalem.

The current situation in the Middle East is still marked by wounds and injustice as a result of the Israeli policy of expansion. Israel's intention to dominate the whole region through aggression, occupation and terrorism hardly needs any explanation. The continued occupation of Palestine, southern Lebanon and the Syrian Golan Heights, in contravention of the relevant resolutions of the Security Council and the General Assembly, represent a consistent Israeli policy of domination and aggression. The ongoing volatile situation in southern Lebanon is further exacerbated by recent public statements by Israeli authorities marked by heavy-handedness and aimed at perpetuating oppression and occupation.

The same policy is pursued through the enhancement of Israeli military capabilities, particularly in terms of nuclear-weapon technology, which continues to go unchecked. It is self-evident that Israeli militarism and its arsenal of weapons of mass destruction, which have thwarted all disarmament initiatives and mechanisms in the region, pose a serious threat and danger to stability and security in the Middle East. The refusal of Israel to adhere to internationally agreed treaties and to accept the International Atomic Energy Agency safeguards regime continues to be the obstacle to the creation of a safe and secure environment in the region.

The Israeli policies and practices, only partially referred to here, have seriously destabilized the already volatile situation in the Middle East. As long as the policy of aggression, state terrorism, occupation, violation of basic human rights and expansionism continues to rule, today's bleak situation will continue to endure.

I wish to close by quoting from President Khatami's remarks made from this podium on 21 September this year:

> "Peace and security in the Middle East, imperative as they are, will only be established through the recognition of the right of all Palestinians to exercise sovereignty over their ancestral homeland. The presently occupied Al-Quds al-Sharif ought to be the house of dialogue and understanding. Resonating from the depth of history, its voice speaks intrinsically against racism and Zionism. Great monotheistic religions can live peacefully together in Al-Quds al-Sharif, but it is the very Israeli rule that has made such a coexistence impossible." *(A/53/PV.8, p. 6)*

Mr. Theron (Namibia): Permit me to begin by saying how glad my delegation is to be able to participate in this debate at a time when the whole world is holding its breath because of the positive signs indicating progress towards the achievement of a comprehensive, just and lasting settlement of the question of Palestine, based on relevant Security Council and General Assembly resolutions.

One of the important lessons that my country learned during its long struggle for independence was never to give up hope but rather to continue to be courageous in trying to achieve freedom. For Namibia this paid dividends, and that is why we are today encouraged by the latest developments regarding Palestine's quest for self-determination, national independence and sovereignty.

The signing of the Wye River Memorandum on 23 October 1998 not only signalled the adoption of measures that will move the peace process forward, but it certainly also provided the players with new tools and a golden opportunity to ensure that true, lasting peace is obtained in the region. We thus welcome the efforts by both parties to implement the Memorandum, especially with regard to the redeployment of troops and security arrangements. The undertaking by the parties to resume final status negotiations is welcome, and we call upon them — in particular Israel — not to undertake measures that might compromise the outcome of these negotiations. At the same time, we urge the sponsors of the peace process, the Security Council and the international community as a whole, now more than ever to redouble their efforts to push the process through.

My delegation, as a member of the Committee on the Exercise of the Inalienable Rights of the Palestinian People, wholly subscribes to the report of the Chairman of the Committee. We wish in particular to stress the importance of peace and reconciliation in the Middle East, which is essential for international peace and security. Furthermore, we share the concerns regarding the adverse human rights situation and the deteriorating humanitarian conditions in the occupied territories.

Namibia remains committed to providing unwavering support for a speedy resolution to the Palestinian question. That is why we have undertaken to host the African regional meeting at Windhoek in April 1999. The meeting will be called the "African meeting in support of the Inalienable Rights of the Palestinian People" and will contribute towards informing international public opinion and promoting action in support of a comprehensive, just and lasting resolution of the question of Palestine in accordance with relevant United Nations resolutions.

My delegation will fail in its duty if, in this forum, it does not congratulate and express its solidarity with the Palestine Liberation Organization and all the Palestinian people on the occasion of the International Day of Solidarity with the Palestinian People, which was commemorated yesterday.

Finally, my Government will continue to give its full support to the Secretary-General in his endeavours to ensure that the United Nations system contributes its utmost in the fields of the economic and social development of the Palestinian people, which is essential for building peace throughout the Middle East.

Mr. Al-Nassir (Qatar) (*interpretation from Arabic*): As we are debating the agenda item on the question of Palestine, I wish at the outset to convey to Mr. Opertti my delegation's appreciation for the efforts he has made regarding the Palestinian question since his assumption of the presidency of the General Assembly at this session. The consensus achieved on the draft resolution entitled "Bethlehem 2000" was one of the first fruits of these efforts.

I wish also to thank the Secretary-General, Mr. Kofi Annan, for his good offices and persistent efforts to resolve outstanding international issues because of his commitment to international peace and security.

I would also like to take this opportunity to express our appreciation to the Committee on the Exercise of the Inalienable Rights of the Palestinian People and to its Chairman, Mr. Ibra Deguène Ka, for the noble efforts made in the service of the just cause of the Palestinian people and to enable that people to attain all their legitimate rights and to establish their independent State on their national territory.

The Charter of the United Nations sets forth the right of peoples to exercise their right to self-determination, a right that has so far eluded the Palestinian people. It is incredibly ironic that all the peoples of the world are commemorating the fiftieth anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights at a time when the Palestinian people are suffering the tragic plight of 50 years' occupation their territories, obliteration of their identity and displacement for most of them. Israel has also recently celebrated the fiftieth anniversary of its establishment at a time when the Palestinian people are languishing under this hideous occupation.

The United Nations has a historical and ethical responsibility towards the Palestinian people. While General Assembly resolution 181 (II) of 29 November 1947 gave Israel the right to exist, the Palestinian people are still struggling for the establishment of their independent state. That resolution provided for the

establishment of two States, one Arab and one Jewish, but only one of these two States has been established.

The Madrid Peace Conference of 1991, held under the auspices of the United States and the Russian Federation, was based on the principle of land for peace in order to achieve a just and lasting peace in the Middle East. On this basis, the Arab States opted for peace — a strategic option for them. Despite all the obstacles facing the peace process at that time, the Declaration of Principles was concluded between the two sides — Palestinian and Israeli — and the Treaty of Peace between Jordan and Israel was also signed. On the Syrian and Lebanese tracks, negotiations also achieved a measure of progress, in spite of the difficulties surrounding the negotiations.

But after the assassination of Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin and the ensuing elections, another Administration came into being in Israel, which led to a cessation of the peace process on all tracks. The entire peace process suffered a setback because of the Israeli Government's reneging on its prior commitments. And despite the American efforts — that is, the efforts of the American President — the situation with regard to the Palestinian track remained unchanged for about 18 months.

Following that period, the Palestinians and the Israelis were brought together in a direct meeting under the auspices of the American President whose efforts were joined by the valuable efforts of King Hussein of Jordan. That meeting was crowned by the signing of the Wye River Memorandum. Despite the fact that the Memorandum dealt with matters on which certain negotiations with the previous Israeli Government had already taken place, the Palestinian side demonstrated great flexibility in order to reach a solution. After the implementation of the first phase of this agreement, and despite all the obstacles that are well known to everyone, we hope that the rest will be implemented as soon as possible. At the same time, negotiations will start on the permanent status on the basis of relevant resolutions of international legitimacy, especially Security Council resolutions 242 (1967) and 338 (1973).

One of the important issues that have to be resolved is the issue of Palestinian refugees; the Israeli Government should have had to allow them to return, in accordance with the Declaration of Principles providing for the return of the Palestinians who have been refugees since 1967, who number about 750,000. However, the intransigence of the Israeli Government has impeded that return, despite the fact that the return of refugees is an international right embodied in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. In addition, the establishment of settlements in the occupied Arab territories, the expropriation of more Palestinian land, the demolition of Palestinian houses, the construction of bypass roads as a means of urban strangulation, the closing of roads and of other occupied areas, and economic blockade are all measures which flagrantly contravened the Geneva Convention relative to the Protection of Civilian Persons in Time of War of 12 August 1949, as well as of the relevant Security Council resolutions. They also contravene the letter and the spirit of the peace process, lead to violence in the area and further impede the peace process.

As to the Syrian and Lebanese tracks, the Israeli Government has turned its back on all the progress achieved, thus nullifying great efforts that were made. It calls for returning to square one, a call which is not logical and is contrary to reason. Further, it is not a call that reflects good faith in the restoration of peace to the area. We all call on the Israeli Government to remain committed to the resumption of negotiations from the point they had reached. We also call on the sponsors of the peace process to take up their role fully in order to achieve the desired goal: a just and lasting peace in the Middle East in accordance with the resolutions of international legitimacy and all the resolutions of the General Assembly, including resolutions 181 (II) and 194 (III), as well as Security Council resolutions 242 (1967), 338 (1973) and 425 (1978).

In conclusion, we would like to express the hope that all the efforts will be united, thus enabling the Palestinian people to exercise its inalienable rights and to establish its independent State on its national territory, with Jerusalem as its capital, in accordance with the resolutions of international legitimacy, at the end of the transitional phase. We also hope not to usher in the next century without the Middle East being an oasis of peace and security after the restoration of all the usurped Arab rights, the establishment of the independent Palestinian State and the return of the occupied Syrian Golan, as well as southern Lebanon and West Bekaa.

The Acting President: We have heard the last speaker in the debate on this item.

I shall now call on those representatives who wish to speak in exercise of the right of reply.

May I remind members that statements in exercise of the right of reply are limited to 10 minutes for the first

intervention and to five minutes for the second and should be made by delegations from their seats.

Mr. Al-Kidwa (Palestine) (*interpretation from Arabic*): Yesterday, under this item, "Question of Palestine", we heard a statement that was not appropriate for the United Nations and the General Assembly. That statement tried to falsify history. It included many contradictions and torpedoed the basis for mutual recognition between the Palestinian and the Israeli sides, as well as the basis for the peace process in the Middle East.

The Ambassador of Israel yesterday denied that there is a Palestinian land and that there is a Palestinian people. He denied occupation. He tried to legitimize the forcible occupation by Israeli settlers on our land. This is not only an extremist kind of position, not only a position that is not in harmony with the peace process in the Middle East, but it is also a very serious position that reflects ideological legends and mythology that run counter to the spirit of the era, as well as the purposes and principles of the Charter. It undermines peace and security in all the Middle East. Thus, this position must be rejected and condemned, not only by the Palestinian side but also by the international community as a whole.

In view of this, I will not respond to the details included in the speaker's statement, except for one point, because it is related to an important event that will take place in the near future: the confirmation of the declaration of independence of Palestine and the establishment of the State of Palestine next year. This point is also related to the Israeli allegation that this step represents a unilateral action and contradicts and violates the agreements concluded. The Palestinian leadership has repeatedly declared its determination to take this historic step on 4 May 1999 and has appealed to the international community to lend its support to this step.

I must make it clear that this position represents neither a threat nor a challenge to any one. It reflects the objective fact that the five-year interim period agreed upon by the Palestinian and Israeli sides, in accordance with the 1993 Declaration of Principles, expires on that date. We hope that both sides will reach an agreement on the final status before then. Unfortunately, the Israeli position makes that rather difficult.

Consequently, and if a final settlement is not reached before the end of the transitional period, the Palestinian side will have no choice but to assume its responsibility in accordance with the inalienable national rights of the Palestinian people and without prejudice to mutual recognition and the other obligations incumbent upon the two parties. We will have no option but to take the step that we have widely announced. Needless to say, at that point we shall strive tirelessly here at the United Nations to translate current developments on the ground into a *de jure* reality in the United Nations, hoping, at that time, that we will enjoy the Assembly's support for our future steps.

Mr. Jacob (Israel): In my comments, I do not wish to enter into an exchange with the Palestinian Permanent Observer. I believe that Israel's position, its desire to move forward in the peace process and its determination to achieve peace with our Palestinian neighbours, was stated clearly by the Permanent Representative of Israel yesterday.

Also clearly stated yesterday was the position of the head of the Palestinian observer delegation, steadfastly denying Israel's legitimacy and diminishing the clear progress made in the peace process to date. Unfortunately, this position has just been confirmed by the Palestinian Permanent Observer. No further commentary is necessary on my part.

Mr. Al-Kidwa (Palestine) (*interpretation from Arabic*): Suffice it for me to refer here to the fact that the representative of Israel was just now unable to use the proper designation for my position, which is the Permanent Observer of Palestine, not the Palestinian Observer. The representative of Israel cannot even use the correct United Nations terminology for my position. Hence, it is up to the Assembly to imagine the reality of this Israeli position.

More important, however, is the fact that our side, as reflected in our statement yesterday, is committed today and in the future to mutual recognition and to all its legal implications in accordance with the existing agreements. We do not deny the legitimacy of Israel and we certainly cannot accept that Israel should deny ours. It is absolutely unacceptable that the Ambassador of Israel should claim that the territories occupied in 1967 are disputed territories. This constitutes a call to us to return once more to demanding our full historical rights. Either there are existing agreements or there are compromises, or there is nothing. The Israeli side cannot have it both ways.

In any case, we leave the evaluation of the differing positions to the States Members of the United Nations,

which has a clear position on Israel's policies and positions, especially those recently declared in this very Hall and elsewhere at the United Nations.

The meeting rose at 1.10 p.m.